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Development of single-cell ICP-TOFMS to measure nanoplastics association with human cells†

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Nanoplastics, solid polymer particles smaller than 1 μm , are suspected to be widely present in the environment, food and air, and may pose a potential threat to human health. Detecting nanoplastics in and associated with individual cells is crucial to understand their mechanisms of toxicity and potential harm. In this context, we developed a single-cell inductively coupled plasma time-of-flight mass spectrometry (sc-ICP-TOFMS) method for the sensitive and rapid quantification of metal-doped model nanoplastics in human cells. By providing multi-elemental fingerprints of both the nanoplastics and the cells, this approach can be advantageous in laboratory toxicological studies as it allows for the simultaneous acquisition of a full mass spectrum with high time resolution. As a proof-of-concept study, we exposed two different human cell lines relevant to inhalation exposures (A549 alveolar epithelial cells and THP-1 monocytes) to Pd-doped nanoplastics. The sc-ICP-TOFMS analysis revealed a similar dose-dependent endocytotic capacity of THP-1 and A549 cells for nanoplastics uptake, and particle internalization was confirmed by transmission electron microscopy. Moreover, single-cell quantification showed that a considerable proportion of the exposed cells (72% of THP-1; 67% of A549) did not associate with any nanoplastics after exposure to 50 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ for 24 h. This highlights the importance to include single-cell analysis in the future safety assessment of nanoplastics in order to account for heterogeneous uptake within cell populations and to identify the origins and response trajectories of nanoplastics in biological tissues. In this regard, sc-ICP-TOFMS can be a powerful approach to provide quantitative data on nanoplastics–cell associations at single cell level for a large number of individual cells.

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Environmental significance

Nanoplastics are suspected to be widely present in the environment, food and air, and may pose a potential threat to human health. Detecting nanoplastics in and associated with individual cells is crucial to understanding their mechanisms of toxicity and potential harm. In this context, we developed a single-cell inductively coupled plasma time-of-flight mass spectrometry (sc-ICP-TOFMS) method for the sensitive and rapid measurement of model nanoplastics associated with cells. Understanding the association of nanoplastics with cells, especially on a cell-by-cell basis, is a powerful approach to assess the heterogeneity of nanoplastics association in biological systems. This is an initial step to appreciating the diversity of nanoplastics–cell interactions in a high-throughput fashion, which can be applied not only to human cell lines, as done here, but also to other cells and biological systems.

1. Introduction

The physical and chemical characteristics of the different size classes of plastic pollution (macroplastics, microplastics and

nanoplastics) will result in diverse fate and hazards.¹ When plastic particles become smaller, there are a number of different processes which influence their environmental risks, including interactions with and adverse effects to organisms. There is little evidence that micrometer-sized particles can cross biological barriers, such as the lung or the gut lining, in large amounts and therefore these particles are anticipated to largely be excreted from the body.² Nevertheless, some microplastics have been observed in human tissues.^{3,4} However, below 400 nm, the biological fate of particles changes. Particle uptake into cells is possible,⁵ biological barriers can be crossed and systemic uptake of particles can occur,^{6–8} which has also been

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shown for nanoplastics.^{9–11} Many studies on the uptake and effects of several polymeric nanomaterials using different cell types have been performed to show that their uptake into cells is comparable to other nanomaterials.^{12–16} Both particle size and surface chemistry (including *e.g.*, eco- or protein corona formation¹⁷) play crucial roles in particle translocation and uptake.¹⁶ Moreover, the diversity of cells can drive divergent particle uptake mechanisms, as demonstrated for 40 nm carboxylated polystyrene particles that showed distinct entry routes in J774A.1 macrophages (macropinocytosis, phagocytosis, and clathrin-mediated endocytosis) and A549 alveolar epithelial cells (caveolin- and clathrin-mediated endocytosis).¹⁸ In general, different uptake mechanisms have been described in a variety of cells but since most studies used primary polystyrene nanoplastics, further work is needed to understand potential differences in uptake pathways due to different polymer types or secondary nanoplastics.¹⁹

Investigating biological interactions between particles and cells is not a new field of research, and thus some mechanistic understanding of how nanoplastics may associate with cells can be gleaned from fields such as nanomedicine and nanotoxicology of engineered nanomaterials.^{20,21} Nanosafety in both these domains focuses on developing methods to understand nanomaterial–cell interactions better. Researchers are also working on techniques for characterizing particles in complex mixtures, as well as in organisms and cellular models. Furthermore, they aim to investigate the chemical and biological effects resulting from the interplay of physicochemical properties of nanomaterials during exposure. These effects include biodistribution, biotransformation, accumulation, and toxicity. This underpins the idea that some of the concepts and approaches used to evaluate other nano-sized objects will also be applicable for nanoplastics.

Assessing nanoplastics association with cells is more analytically challenging than other metal-based nanomaterials because of their chemical composition. Plastics particles down to the μm -size can be detected by monitoring the carbon content by ICP-MS analysis, however due to the low sensitivity of ICP-MS for carbon, this approach is not sufficient to target nano-sized plastics.^{22–24} Labelled or doped nanoplastics have been previously used as an approach to trace and characterize nanoplastics in complex media and biological tissues, including the use of fluorescent dyes, isotope labels²⁵ and trace metals.²⁶ Fluorescence labeling is a common method due to ease of detection by simple optical methods, but limitations include potential modification of particle properties and bio-interactions from incorporated dyes, stability of fluorescence, leakage of dyes from the particle as well as limited sensitivity to detect and quantify individual or small particles.^{27–29} Using metal-doped nanoplastics has been shown to have several key advantages over the other options, since existing standard methods for trace metals analysis exist and can be exploited for measuring metal-doped plastics in a variety of technical and environmental systems, including biological tissues and cells.^{9,10,30–36} In these instances, a sample is typically measured by digesting the sample matrix by microwave-induced acid

digestion and the metal content analyzed by ICP-MS to back-calculate plastic concentrations in a given sample. In terms of assessing particle fate and transport, or particle uptake and depuration in organisms, these metrics are often sufficient for the study at hand to assess behavior of nanoplastics in the target system. However, this bulk analysis does not allow one to measure uptake on a cell-by-cell basis, or to assess the number of nanoplastics associated with an individual cell.

By further discretizing the information obtained by ICP-MS on undigested samples, such as with single-particle ICP-MS (sp-ICP-MS) or single-cell ICP-MS (sc-ICP-MS), one is able to assess individual nanoparticles or nanoparticles associated with individual cells.^{37,38} In both cases, the goal is to analyze the sample on a single entity basis, but the difference between single-cell or single-particle ICP-MS lies in the sample being analyzed and, in some cases, a change in the sample introduction system. After nebulization of the sample, the individual entities (nanoparticles and/or cells) are carried in droplets into the plasma, where they are subsequently vaporized, atomized and finally ionized. Each individual entity generates an ion cloud, which is recorded as a spike above the background. The frequency of the detected spikes is proportional to the number concentration of the single entities, while the magnitude of the spike correlates to the mass of the single entity.^{39,40} Often, a quadrupole ICP-MS is used and thus only one (or, with fast single-particle ICP-MS, two)⁴¹ elements can be recorded for each entity event. Alternatively, by utilizing an ICP time-of-flight mass spectrometer (ICP-TOFMS), the entire mass spectrum can be obtained simultaneously for each single entity event, allowing one to determine the entire elemental fingerprint of individual particles, cells, or aggregates.^{42–48} In this way, association of metal-doped nanoplastics can be measured with individual cells, providing much better resolution for particle association with cells than with other methods.⁴⁹

It should be noted that the groundwork for sc-ICP-TOFMS was laid over a decade ago by Bandura *et al.* who introduced the concept of time-resolved analysis of individual cells, thereby paving the way for mass cytometry.⁵⁰ Mass cytometry instruments, also known as CyTOF, are ICP-MS instruments with a time-of-flight detector specifically designed for single-cell analysis. Because the technique falls short in detecting the majority of the intrinsic elements present in single cells (analytes with masses <75 amu), metal-isotope labels are used to tag cells, enabling their detection based on the associated metal labels. Nevertheless, technological advancements of this approach have revolutionized the field, enabling high-throughput analysis of single cells in the micrometer range. Consequently, mass cytometry has now found applications in large-scale multicenter clinical studies.⁵¹ However, when specifically exploring the metallome,⁵² which refers to the complete inventory of metal species present in a biological system encompassing essential metals, trace metals, and metalloids, and their roles in various biological processes, the limitations of mass cytometry to detect the lower mass elements becomes apparent. Thus, in order to measure the majority of all



endogenous cellular elements, an ICP-TOFMS enabling the acquisition of a full mass spectrum ranging from $m/z = 7$ to 280 is advantageous.

In this manuscript, we developed a sc-ICP-TOFMS method to assess nanoplastics association with human cells grown in culture both to show a proof of principle of the technique and to compare association/uptake of nanoplastics across two of the most relevant cell types (*i.e.* monocytes/macrophages and epithelial cells) for uptake and interaction with nanoparticles at biological barriers. The focus of this study was set on lung cells since inhalation is one of the main exposure routes for nanoplastics uptake besides ingestion and dermal contact and the lung is particularly sensitive to nanoparticle exposure.⁵³ Moreover, monocytes/macrophages were studied as they are the first line of defense of the innate immune system and immediately react with nanoparticles, triggering a variety of immune responses.⁵⁴ Metal-doped nanoplastics allowed us to harness the specificity of metal analytics in the context of plastics research, and by using an ICP-TOFMS we could confidently pair nanoplastics events with cell events. More specifically, we aimed to 1) optimize the sample preparation and sample introduction systems for high particle and cell recovery, 2) show the utility of sc-ICP-TOFMS to measure individual nanoplastics with individual cells and 3) understand dose-dependent association of model nanoplastics with human monocytes (THP-1) and alveolar epithelial cells (A549). Collectively, this work makes a strong foundation for a powerful analytical method to explore nanoplastics exposures at the single cell level.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Model nanoplastics synthesis and characterization

Palladium (Pd) doped nanoplastics were synthesized in-house as previously published by Mitrano *et al.*²⁶ In brief, nanoplastics were created through emulsion polymerization where a Pd-containing salt was introduced together with an initiator into a reactor containing acrylonitrile and SDS to form nanoplastics with a metal content of approximately 0.3 wt% Pd. Subsequently, a shell of polystyrene was grown on top of this core particle to achieve a final diameter of approximately 200 nm. Pd-doped nanoplastics were characterized prior to use in the exposure studies in terms of particle size, surface charge and metal content. Particle hydrodynamic diameter and stability was determined by Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) and zeta potential, respectively (Malvern Zetasizer). Previous studies have tested the stability of the Pd-tracer incorporated into the nanoplastics to ensure no leaching of metal occurred over the duration of the exposure experiments.⁵⁵

2.2 Cell culture preparation and nanoplastics exposure

The human alveolar epithelial cell line A549 (CCL-185, ATCC) and the human acute monocytic leukemia cell line THP-1 (TIP-202, ATCC) were used for nanoplastics–cell association studies. Cells were maintained in cell culture medium (CM), which was

RPMI-1640 medium (Sigma-Aldrich, R0883) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (Sigma-Aldrich F9665), 0.2 mg mL⁻¹ L-glutamine (Sigma G7513) and 1% penicillin–streptomycin (Sigma, P4458). The particle stock solutions were diluted with CM to the required concentrations immediately prior to the cell treatments. For exposure studies, cells were first seeded (10×10^6 A549 cells in 10 mL CM or 8×10^6 THP-1 cells in 8 mL per T75 flask) and cultivated for 4 h before addition of the same volume of CM containing double-concentrated particles (*i.e.* 0, 1, 10 and 100 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ nanoplastics) to achieve final concentrations of 0, 0.5, 5 and 50 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ nanoplastics. This approach was used to achieve the same treatment procedure for both cell types since a simple medium exchange was not possible for non-adherent THP-1 cells. Three biologically independent replicates were performed for all cell exposures. After 24 h of exposure, THP-1 suspension cells were directly collected while adherent A549 cells were first washed three times with phosphate buffered saline (PBS) to remove non-associated particles and then trypsinized. In order to remove unbound nanoplastics, cells were washed twice with PBS, fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde (ROTI-Histofix 4%, P087.5) for 10 min and washed again twice with ultrapure water. Cells were shipped and stored at 4 °C until sc-ICP-TOFMS analysis. Prior to sc-ICP-TOFMS analysis, the cells were again washed with MilliQ water (4 \times) and diluted by a factor of 10 in MilliQ water to achieve appropriate particle concentrations for analysis (see Fig. S1 in the ESI[†]).

2.3 ICP-TOFMS procedure in single-cell mode

An ICP-TOFMS instrument (icpTOF S2, TOFWERK AG, Thun, Switzerland) was used for all measurements and has already been described elsewhere.^{23,56} The icpTOF S2 ran at a TOF extraction frequency of 83.3 kHz and was operated in continuous mode to collect mass spectra at 1000 kHz. A full mass spectrum (m/z 7–280) was measured systematically with each datapoint.⁵⁷ The instrument was equipped with a notch filter, which allowed to selectively attenuate intense signals from abundant species such as plasma-gas ions (N_2^+ , H_2O^+ , O_2^+ , Ar^+) as well as matrix ions (Na^+) thereby protecting the detector.⁵⁷ Cell suspensions were introduced using a single-cell sample introduction system (SC-SIS, Glass Expansion Inc., Australia) in combination with a manual syringe (KD Scientific) at a flow rate of 10 $\mu\text{L min}^{-1}$.⁵⁸ This dedicated sample introduction system consisted of a low flow pneumatic nebulizer (MicroMist HE U-Series Nebulizer 0.2 mL min⁻¹) and a total consumption spray chamber, in which the use of a sheath prevented sample deposition and improved transport efficiency. The nebulization efficiency was assessed using a dilute suspension of commercially available monodisperse spherical 50 nm Au nanoparticles (50.1 nm \pm 1.8 nm, original PNC 3.9 \times 10¹⁰ particles per mL, NanoComposix, San Diego, CA, USA). By applying the particle frequency method,⁵⁹ the nebulization efficiency of the system was determined to be 83 \pm 3%. The instrument was operated in collision cell mode with 5 mL min⁻¹ of a premix (He + 7% H₂) to remove the interference of



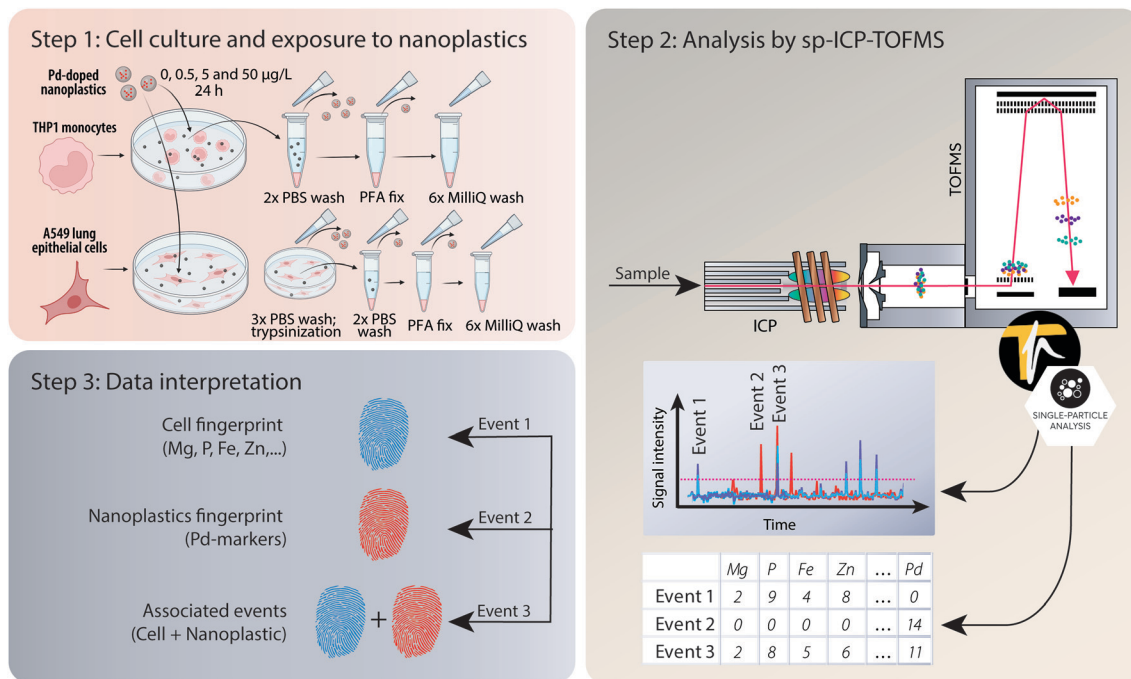


Fig. 1 Overview of the experimental design. After cell culture, exposure to model Pd-doped nanoplastics, and washing (step 1), the different cell samples were introduced into the ICP via a dedicated single-cell sample introduction system (step 2). Using the ICP-TOFMS, which provides high-sensitivity full-spectrum mass analysis at high time resolution, multi-elemental fingerprints of each particle event were measured, and these could then be assigned to different sub-populations, *i.e.* cells, nanoplastics or associated events (cells + nanoplastics) during data processing (step 3). Portions of the figure were created with <https://Biorender.com>.

ArO^+ on $^{56}\text{Fe}^+$. A detailed list of operating conditions can be found in Table S1 in the ESI.† For each sample, >1000 cells were measured.

After acquisition, the data were then processed in TOFPilot (v2.10, TOFWERK AG, Thun, Switzerland) using the *LiquidReprocessing* module, which included data thresholding, *i.e.* identification of discrete events such as cells, nanoplastics or associated events from the baseline, followed by split event correction and baseline subtraction. These steps allowed us to refine the dataset to the selected analytes of interest. Integrated signal intensities for the selected nuclides (^{24}Mg , ^{31}P , ^{56}Fe , ^{64}Zn and ^{65}Cu targeting cell events as well as the Pd isotopes ^{104}Pd , ^{105}Pd , ^{106}Pd , ^{108}Pd and ^{105}Pd targeting nanoplastics events) were then exported in CSV format for further data analysis, using R-scripts (R Statistical Software, v4.1.2; R Core Team 2021) written in-house. An overview of the experimental design from cell culture to analysis and data interpretation is presented in Fig. 1.

2.4 Cell sample preparation for transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

Cells were seeded (3.33×10^6 THP-1 cells in 6 mL CM or 2.67×10^6 A549 cells in 5 mL CM per T25 flask) and cultivated for 4 h before addition of nanoplastics (0 or $50 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$). After 24 h of exposure, THP-1 cells were directly collected, and the cell pellet was washed twice with PBS. The adherent A549 cells were first washed once with PBS, trypsinized and the cell

pellet washed twice with PBS. Cells were fixed with 2.5% Glutaraldehyde (Sigma-Aldrich) in 0.1 M Na-cacodylate buffer (Electron Microscopy Sciences) for 2 h, washed twice with 0.1 M Na-cacodylate buffer and stored at 4 °C in fresh 0.1 M Na-cacodylate buffer for several days. Samples were stained with 1% osmium tetroxide (Electron Microscopy Sciences) in 0.1 M Na-cacodylate buffer for 1 h in the dark by incubation at room temperature. After three washes with MilliQ water, the cell pellets were dehydrated using an ethanol series (30%, 50%, 70%, 90%, 100%), incubated in a mixture of 1:1 ethanol 100% and Epon 812 substitute (Epoxy embedding kit 45359, Sigma-Aldrich) for 1 h and kept overnight in 100% Epon. The samples were subsequently embedded in fresh Epon inside molds and cured for 4 days in an oven at 60 °C. Ultra-thin sectioning from the resin blocks was performed using an ultramicrotome (Leica EM UC6) with an ultra 35° diamond knife (Di-ATOME). The 70–100 nm thick sections were placed on Formvar-coated copper grids (200 mesh, EM resolutions) and were imaged by transmission electron microscopy with a Zeiss EM 900 microscope (Carl Zeiss Microscopy GmbH, Germany) at 80 kV and different magnifications.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Nanoplastics characterization by sp-ICP-TOFMS

Before exposing the cells to the model Pd-doped nanoplastics, it was important to first assess the feasibility of detection of the



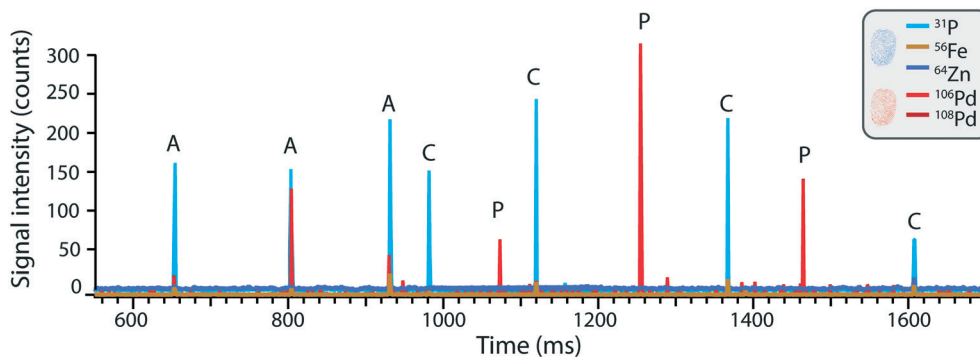


Fig. 3 The time trace of THP-1 cells exposed to $5 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ Pd-doped nanoplastics where different species can be recognized as pulses above the background. Namely: (C) single THP-1 cells without associated nanoplastics, (P) nanoplastics and (A) associated events.

adaptability and its potential for automation through use of an autosampler allowing for unattended operation⁶² and automated data processing, which together allow for the analysis of more cells and would facilitate capturing more infrequent nanoplastics/cells associations at reduced exposure concentrations.

An overview of the number of cells, nanoplastics and associated events detected under the different exposure

conditions is presented in Fig. 4. A similar number of cells were detected across all samples (Fig. 4, panels a and e) and, as expected, increasing numbers of nanoplastics were observed with higher exposure doses (Fig. 4, panels b and f). Consequently, nanoplastics–cell association was positively correlated with the exposure concentration for both cell types (Fig. 4, panels c and g). Some nanoplastics were detected for non-exposed cells, likely originating from cross-

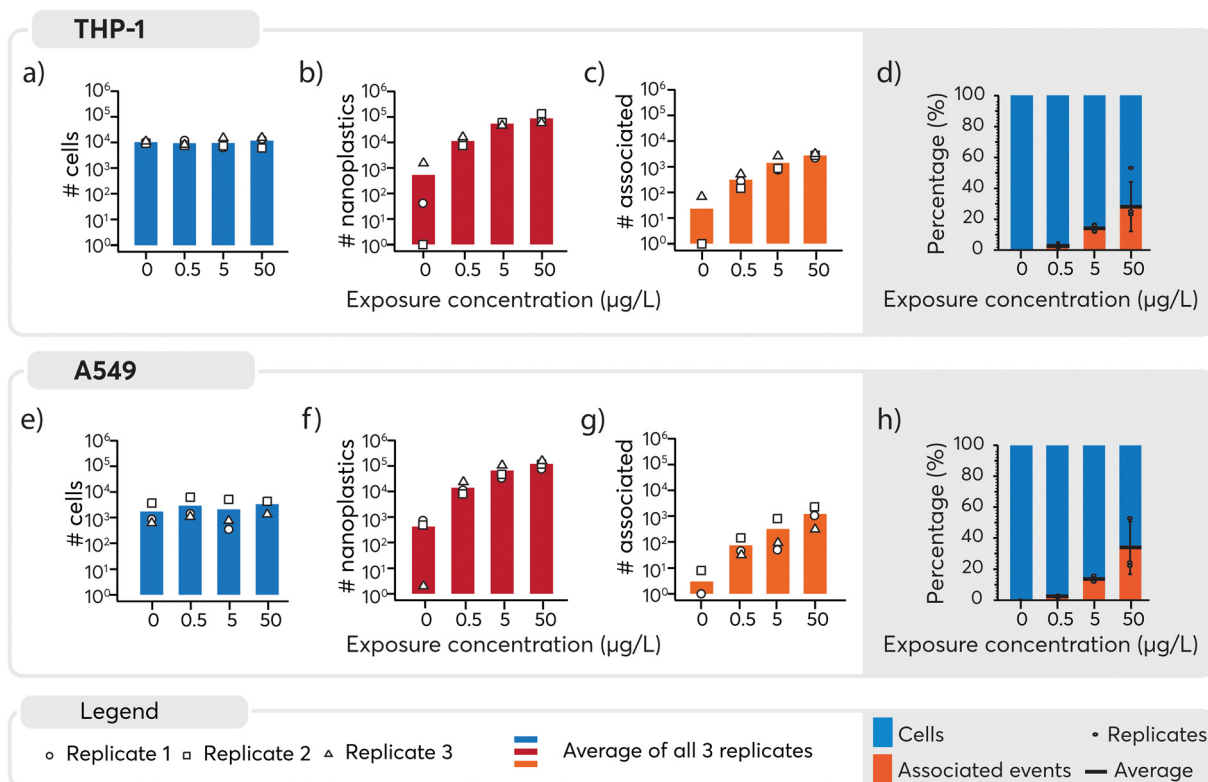


Fig. 4 Overview of the number of cells events (panels a and e), nanoplastics events (panels b and f) and associated events (panels c and g) recorded per cell type and per exposure concentration for all replicates. Solid bars indicate averages across experimental exposure replicates and the average of each replicate is indicated by the open symbol. The total number of cells and nanoplastics measured in each replicate varied, but typically at least 1000 cell events were measured per replicate. The average association of cell–nanoplastics after normalization to the total number of cells per replicate is shown in panels d) and h). The average and individual replicates are represented by a horizontal black line and black dots, respectively. The standard deviation was calculated on the normalized data and added to the bar plot. Overall, as the nanoplastics exposure is increased, a dose-dependent increase in particle association is observed for both cell lines.



corresponded to nanoplastics cell internalization or surface adhesion, transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were acquired for cells exposed to $50 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ nanoplastics. Micrographs confirmed that nanoplastics were indeed internalized by both cell types (Fig. 5). Clusters of particles were observed mostly in endocytic vesicles present in the cytosol, indicating the involvement of active endocytotic uptake mechanisms. This finding is similar to a previous study, showing the involvement of several endocytotic uptake mechanisms (e.g., phagocytosis, micropinocytosis, clathrin- and caveolin-independent endocytosis) in the uptake of 40 nm polystyrene nanoparticles in J774A.1 mouse macrophages and A549 epithelial cells in dependence of particle size and cell type.¹⁸ Moreover, particles were only found in some of the cells, which is in line with the sc-ICP-TOFMS data, where association was observed in approximately 30% of the cells. Furthermore, from the images it can be seen that the cells contained different numbers of nanoplastics per cell, again highlighting a heterogeneous association, supporting sc-ICP-TOFMS findings shown in Table S3.† However, TEM is not well suited for quantitative analysis and some cells might contain particles in areas outside of the imaged section. Indeed, here, the selected images show a rather larger clustering of nanoplastics, which would support the observed large mean and standard deviation presented in Table S3.† However, it is possible that in another section fewer nanoplastics would be observed. Consequently, by combining these techniques, we have achieved a more complete picture of nanoplastics–cell interactions, leveraging the strengths of each analytical approach. The high-throughput capability of sc-ICP-TOFMS provided a robust statistical analysis of nanoplastics associations across a large-scale experiment, while TEM offered detailed insights into the internalization of nanoplastics at the cellular level.

4. Conclusions

Collectively, sc-ICP-TOFMS holds significant potential for assessing particle association in biological systems. First, it offers faster throughput compared to techniques such as transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) for assessing particle association. This accelerated analysis allows for high-resolution measurements of individual cells in a shorter time frame. Second, by measuring the full mass spectrum, sc-ICP-TOFMS enables the detection of single cells based on their intrinsic elements, eliminating the need for labeling and reducing potential biases or artifacts in the analysis. Third, measuring particle association on a cell-by-cell basis enables a more accurate assessment of biological variability. In this way, sc-ICP-TOFMS allows researchers to capture the heterogeneity within a sample and better understand the distribution and localization of particles within and amongst different cell populations. Finally, sc-ICP-TOFMS has the potential to provide elemental quantification at extremely low levels, allowing for the detection and analysis of trace elements, nanoparticles, or in this case metal-labeled

nanoplastics that may be missed by other techniques. This capability opens up new possibilities for studying subtle interactions between cells and particles. Further research is needed to optimize and standardize this technique for widespread use, and improvements could include: 1) high(er) sample throughput, with possible automation and higher transport efficiency specifically for cells and 2) a more streamlined data post-processing workflow and normalization procedures to accommodate the large information density gained in such a multiparametric analysis. Nevertheless, the advantages outlined above position sc-ICP-TOFMS as a promising tool for advancing our understanding of particle–cell interactions and their implications in various biological systems.

Here, the sc-ICP-TOFMS method allowed us to successfully detect model nanoplastics with a Pd-label as well as their association with human cells. We observed a dose-dependent uptake of nanoplastics in THP-1 monocytes and A549 alveolar epithelial cells and quantification data at single cell level revealed similar numbers of associated nanoplastics with both cell types. Interestingly, uptake was highly heterogeneous within the same cell population, with some cells being associated with many particles while others remained nanoplastics free. This has important implications for future hazard assessments of nanoplastics, since cells with higher particle number association, especially uptake, may exhibit differential bioresponses compared to cells without associated particles. While the current study focused on the effect of one exposure time, namely 24 h, the time-dependent aspect should not be neglected and future studies should investigate different exposure times to also understand time-dependent associations of nanoplastics. Therefore, advanced single-cell techniques such as single-cell RNAseq could be used to complement the single cell particle association data obtained in this study to decipher toxicity responses of nanoplastics. Although this study was performed with relatively simple *in vitro* monocultures, the sc-ICP-TOFMS approach developed here could be explored for advanced co-culture models, organoid cultures or *ex vivo/in vivo* tissues.

Overall, assessment of human health hazards of nanoplastics is currently a high priority research area, however, researchers are facing major challenges in the detection of nanoplastics in biological tissues. sc-ICP-TOFMS could provide a promising analytical technique for the sensitive and fast quantification of metal-labeled nanoplastics at single cell level in order to complement other approaches and gain novel insights into potential toxicity mechanisms. Furthermore, while the current study focuses on metal-doped nanoplastics, real-life plastic debris contain metal additives, which could potentially be used as tracers for the nanoplastics.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.



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